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ABSTRACT

Field research conducted at a Japanese computer-assembly plant in Germany is reported, and aspects of translingual and intercultural communication between two American competitors, the Japanese and the Germans, are examined. Translingual communication is defined as any language-based communication and information transfer between native speakers of different languages. In the plant studied, there was a strong territorial presumption for the use of German in all situations, but English was declared by the Japanese company to be the house language and was used for signs, facility tours, product labeling, technical manuals, and computer keyboard configuration. Cultural differences centered around open versus closed office space, length of the working day, behavior in meetings, and decision making. It is concluded that the linguistic accommodation Japanese people show toward Americans is not the general rule, but that the Japanese strategy appears to be to concentrate on English as their second language for use in the English-speaking world and then to attempt to negotiate it elsewhere. It is suggested that although English is the dominant world language, it does not decrease the need for access to information encoded in other languages and the conditions under which the language of communication is negotiated in translingual situations. (LB)

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THE JAPANESE AS LINGUISTS: TRANSLINGUAL AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN A JAPANESE COMPUTER-ASSEMBLY PLANT IN GERMANY

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In the American foreign language enterprise, foreign language for world business and foreign language in the service of American economic competitiveness has been conducted in a context of a number of stated and implied notions and assertions. Included among them is the assertion that one can buy in any language but should sell in the language of the customer, that one must stress maximum linguistic accommodation to the language of one's non-Anglophone counterparts. More specifically, economist Lester Thurow, among others, has repeatedly made unfavorable comparisons between the number of Americans who know Japanese and the number of Japanese who know English. Cited by itself, such a statistic is an implied argument that Japanese success in the American market is in no small measure a result of the fact that the Japanese are excellent linguists who are in a position to be linguistically accommodative to their American counterparts. Americans would tend to generalize this statistic for the Japanese, assuming that they have many persons who know the languages of all the countries where Japanese do business, and that they emphasize linguistic accommodation to their customers and opposite numbers in their business dealings outside the language territory of English. The present study will examine the validity of this view by reporting on field research conducted at a Japanese computer-assembly plant in Germany. In addition, it will report on other interesting aspects of translingual and intercultural communication between two of our most formidable international competitors, the Japanese and the Germans.

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BACKGROUND

On April 1, 1989, a Japanese computer manufacturer laid the cornerstone for a factory near a town in southern Germany to assemble top-of-the-line laptop computers with an eye toward positioning itself to penetrate the post-1992 European market. The first assembly line went into production on April 1, 1990, and a second followed in October. As of March 1991, plans were under way to double production and add a manufacturing facility for printed circuit boards. Three hundred persons are expected to employed at the plant by the end of 1991. Six of the staff members are Japanese. The only activity at the plant is manufacturing and assembly. The assembled computers are shipped to a warehousing and distribution center on the Lower Rhine.

TRANSLINGUAL COMMUNICATION AT THE PLANT

Lide defines translingual communication as any language-based communication and information transfer between native speakers of different languages. In such communicative situations, the language of communication must be negotiated, imposed, or otherwise arrived at. In the plant in question, there is a strong territorial presumption for the use of German in all situations and for all functions. Nevertheless, English was declared by the Japanese company to be the house language. English-language signs identify the various functional areas and departments: Showroom, Warehouse, Assembly Line, General Affairs. Upper Echelon position designations are also predominantly in English: General Manager, Assistant General Manager, Senior Manager. Tours of the facility, presentations, and news briefings, are given in English for non-Anglophone,

non-German visitors. With the exception of a multilingual Japanese executive secretary (Fremdsprachenkorrespondentin) fluent in English and German, English is the lingua franca for all communication between the Japanese staff and the German employees. English also serves as the lingua franca during the visits of German supervisory employees at the home office in Japan. Employment contracts and personnel and payroll records are, of course, in German and are handled by German employees, as are other dealings with the local community and officials.

A limited but highly visible and symbolic aspect of accommodation to the language of the customer is product labeling. All the laptops shipped from the plant are shipped with what was called the "international" (English-language) keyboard. All the special keys unique to computer keyboards --Ctrl, Alt, Ins, Del, PgUp, PgDn, Home, Num Lock, Scroll Lock--are labeled in English. The configuration of the upper left keys is the English-language QWERTY rather than the AZERTY for French or QWERZ for German. Any Francophone or Germanophone touch typist would make many errors using an English keyboard. The three umlaut keys common on German typewriter keyboards are also absent. Foreign language persons who have experienced the expense and frustration of having to have keyboards reconfigured for the languages they use professionally will find this aspect of failure to sell in the language of the customer surprising. When questioned about shipping computers with English-language keyboards, the personnel manager of the plant remarked simply that it was the international keyboard, apparently finding nothing amiss about the matter. Lide subsequently visited a Computerland store in Frankfurt that carried the same brand of laptops. He was told that the customers for laptop computers at that particular store were mainly American businessmen living in Frankfurt. He was also told that it is possible to special-order a

German keyboard, which would probably mean that moving and relabeling of keys would have to be done at the distribution center on the Lower Rhine. Three factors may mitigate the negative effects of selling computers with English keyboards on the European continent: (1) Touch typing does not appear to be widely taught in the elite German high schools (Gymnasien) schools from which the German clientele for laptops will have graduated, thus lessening the QWERTY versus QWERZ effect. (2) A top-of-the-line laptop is a professional status symbol with which English labeling is in accord with the prestige and symbolic internationalism that Haarmann has identified as belonging to English worldwide. (3) For most business users, a laptop is used not for extensive word processing but for numbers crunching and for calling up data during client visits.

In late 1990, a company "bible"--a detailed technical manual of operating procedures--was to be made available to German-speaking employees. It was composed in Japanese and translated into English by a native speaker of Japanese. It was then translated into German by a native speaker of German with no knowledge of Japanese. The potential for distortion of meaning using such a process is mind-boggling. Nevertheless, the multilingual Japanese executive secretary fluent in all three languages was not consulted.

The Japanese engineers and managers are given little incentive to learn German. As with other Japanese enterprises in Germany, Japanese staff are transferred to their next assignment, usually in another language territory, after two or three years.

English as the house language was symbolically underscored by the hiring of an English teacher starting in February of 1990, even before the plant went into production. As of early 1991, two teachers are working part-time on a free-lance basis at the plant. The English courses are

intermediate and advanced conversation courses taught at company expense, usually after the end of the shift. The first courses were for administrative personnel, but subsequently they were targeted at interested production workers, even though the latter are not required to use English on the job. With English being used as the lingua franca with non-Japanese employees during sojourns at the home office in Japan, English courses have been organized for German engineering and technical personnel at the plant to prepare them for such trips. In such courses, clients request that attention be given not only to general communicative functions but also to technical and business vocabulary. Unlike courses for the German production workers, these courses meet during business hours.

Only one Japanese manager has participated in the general-focus English classes, and he dropped out, citing workload pressures as the reason. Germans in the English classes increasingly interpret the lack of Japanese participation as a sign that the Japanese, unlike themselves, simply do not care about improving their proficiency in English. In early 1991, however, three Japanese managers expressed an interest in organizing a course in English pronunciation for speakers of Japanese.

The interest in a pronunciation course for Japanese personnel appears to have been motivated by difficulty on the part of Japanese-accented speakers of English in making themselves understood to German-accented speakers. External software consultants brought in to troubleshoot computer programs in the plant reported significant difficulties communicating in English with Japanese speakers, both in understanding their Japanese-accented speech and in determining intended meaning of their Japanese clients. Similar difficulties have been reported within the plant. Extensive use is made of gestural language and graphic illustrations to simplify communication. Factors beside pronunciation also play a

role. On one occasion, a Japanese manager was observed accompanying a clerical employee to her desk to complete a communicative act that had begun on the other side of the facility. Holding up a sheet of A 4 lined paper with writing on it, he said with a pronounced Japanese accent: "This paper. Three." It was eventually established that his request was for three lined A 4 pads.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The plant was designed in Japan, with open office space for all persons below the level of General Manager and Assistant General Manager. This lead to considerable intercultural conflict with the Germans, whose preference for the private sphere and closed doors is well known and was widely discussed about a decade ago among American teachers of German. Eventually, five-foot-high room dividers have been brought in to divide the space. As the acting personnel director told one of the authors in July: "Das haben wir schwer erkämpft." (We had to fight very hard for them.)

Japanese and German managerial personnel have evinced sharply differing attitudes concerning the appropriate length of the working day. German managers were accustomed to the same thirty-seven-hour work week as the workers on the production line. For some months, the Japanese managers appeared to be accommodating themselves to the shorter German workday, compared to the eleven hours common for managers in Japan. Then a VIP delegation arrived from the home office. Following the delegation's departure, the Japanese managers were observed to be once more working longer, Japanese-length days. Japanese informants not connected with the

plant interpret this changed behavior as an indication that accommodation to the shorter work week had not been well received by the delegation from the home office. The informants also suggested that the German-based Japanese staff might well have been reminded of their traditional Japanese roles and responsibilities.

Beliefs about what constitutes appropriate behavior in meetings have also undergone adjustments. The Germans, accustomed to Western-style conflict-model discussions, found the apparent passivity and acquiescence of the Japanese colleagues first puzzling and amusing and then frustrating. Initially, they attributed this silence or lack of opposition to their colleagues' poor command of English, but they soon realized that those same colleagues were asking penetrating questions after the meeting that proved that not only had they understood what was being said, but that they were no means the pushovers they had seemed to their German counterparts.

Initially, German managers and administrative staff responded enthusiastically to what was they thought would be a non-hierarchical, participatory management structure and style, a style responsive and open to input at any level. In practice, however, there have been a number of occasions on which decisions German employees extected to make locally were in fact made at the home office. Here the confusion may well have as much to do with multinational corporate culture as it does with national or regional cultures.

CONCLUSIONS

The salient conclusion to be drawn from this case study is that the linguistic accommodation Japanese show toward Americans is not the general rule. Rather, the Japanese strategy appears to be to concentrate on English as their second language for use in the English-speaking world and then to attempt to negotiate it as a lingua franca everywhere else. If this is true, the relative interlingual weight of English as a world language depends not so much on the economic strength of the English-speaking world as it does on the language being pushed as a lingua franca by the Pacific Rim.

This case study presents a picture of translingual and intercultural communication in a highly successful Japanese-run enterprise that is anything but problem-free. A building was designed without regard for the preferences in organization of space in the culture where it was to be erected; in the case of the workday, the cultural norms of the home country tend to be enforced abroad; customers are not accommodated in product labeling and in making products easy to use in the customers' language; documents are transliterated into English in Japan by native speakers of Japanese; the person with the most foreign language expertise --the multilingual executive secretary in the case of the procedures manual--is kept out of the loop; there is no evidence that the home office encourages its nationals to learn the language of the host country; and managers are rotated among foreign assignments in ways that decrease their motivation to do so.

This study also has two potential implications for the American foreign language community. First, that community should not continue to ignore the fact that English is the dominant world language. This dominance does not decrease the need for access to information encoded in

other languages, but it does affect the conditions under which the language of communication is negotiated in translingual situations. Second, we feel it is an imitable example of field research. Neither of the authors was trained in linguistic or anthropological field research, but we feel that foreign language researchers should acquire such training and seek funding for much-needed research projects that would require it. There are exciting opportunities for foreign language persons to study actual translingual communication in the field as participant observers. Such research, by getting us beyond the classroom and away from the taint of the merely pedagogical, can go a long way toward giving our field the disciplinary status it sorely needs but does not widely enjoy.